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High School Teaching and College Expectations in Writing and Reading

J. P. Patterson and David Duer report survey results about the importance secondary and postsecondary educators place on specific writing and reading skills. While differences in the value of grammar instruction between the two groups are noted, the most significant issue raised may be the different types of instruction in high school classrooms of college-bound and non-college-bound students.

Readers of *English Journal* routinely encounter articles about what educators think should be taught in high school English classrooms.

Less often discussed, at least in a systematic way, is what actually does get taught in such classrooms across the United States. Similarly, high school English teachers strive to teach the skills they think colleges and universities want from their students, but these teachers may have no way of knowing how well their efforts match up with the expectations of instructors of first-year courses at postsecondary institutions.

To help address these issues, we report here some of the results of a set of national surveys designed to find out what writing and reading skills are taught by high school teachers and expected of incoming students by instructors of common first-year college courses. The survey results reveal a good, but not perfect, correspondence between practice and expectations. While the high school teachers and college instructors responding to the surveys mostly agree on which writing and reading skills are most important, the college instructors appear to place more stress on grammar and usage than do the high school teachers. At the same time, in a dubious sort of agreement, both groups gave relatively low importance ratings to many higher-order reading skills related to evaluating or judging text. The survey results also suggest that curriculum differentiation, or tracking, continues to influence the kind of instruction some students receive—raising the important, sensitive question of whether all students are being

adequately equipped with appropriate writing and reading skills.

The Surveys

Every three to four years, ACT Inc., an independent, not-for-profit organization, conducts nationwide surveys of secondary-level teachers and instructors of typical first-year college courses to help ensure that its educational achievement tests (such as the ACT) are aligned with what is taught in secondary-level classes and what is expected of incoming college students. In 2002–03, ACT sent about 10,900 writing and 5,200 reading surveys to secondary- and postsecondary-level teachers across the United States. Overall, 20 percent of those educators completed and returned a survey. After providing some demographic information and naming a course he or she currently taught, each survey participant rated (on a 5-point scale, with 5 being the highest possible rating) either seventy-three writing skills or sixty-four reading skills in terms of the skills' importance in that course (secondary-level teachers) or as a prerequisite for success in that course (college instructors). For most of the skills, secondary-level teachers were also asked to indicate whether each skill was or was not taught in the class they named. (A more complete summary of the

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method used to conduct the surveys, along with additional results and tables, can be found on ACT's Web site.¹⁾

The Most Important Skills: On Common Ground

Results from both the writing and reading surveys reveal that the high school teachers and college

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instructors for the most part agree on which skills are most important. For example, of the ten survey items dealing with the writing process, both high school teachers and college instructors gave their three highest ratings to "Selecting a topic, formulating a thesis," "Editing and proofreading," and "Revising focusing on con-

tent rather than mechanics." In a similar vein, of the thirteen survey items related to purposes of writing, high school teachers and college instructors gave four of their five highest ratings to the same skills: "Developing logical arguments and supporting them with valid evidence," "Writing an argumentative or persuasive essay," "Writing expository prose," and "Analyzing an issue or problem."

The reading survey results show similar areas of agreement. For instance, seven of the ten highest-rated skills for both groups of educators were the same (see fig. 1).

Grammar and Usage: Grounds for Discussion

Based on the writing survey results, however, the high school teachers and college instructors place

different degrees of importance on grammar and usage. Compared to the skills grouped under the headings "Writing Strategy," "Sentence Structure," "Organization of Writing," "Style," and "Punctuation," the "Grammar and Usage" skills, averaged together, receive from the high school teachers the lowest median importance rating (4.26 out of a possible 5). Similarly, fewer high school teachers (69 percent) report teaching this group of skills, considered together, than any of the other five groups named above. By contrast, the "Grammar and Usage" skills were, as a whole, rated most important by college instructors of entry-level English courses (4.07) and second-most important by college instructors of English as a second language (ESL) and developmental writing (4.13). Although all three importance ratings are high—near the top of the scale, in fact—the fairly low percent taught, as reported by high school teachers, suggests a genuine difference in priorities.

Research supports the conclusion that grammar and usage should not be taught in isolation (Noguchi; Schuster; Weaver) and that instruction devoted to discussing the rhetorical and holistic aspects of writing is more meaningful and productive (Flower; Hillocks). It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that some of the high school teachers surveyed might have been reluctant to agree that they place much emphasis on, say, teaching students to correctly use irregular verb forms. Still, the survey response raises the question of whether high school teachers are paying enough attention to grammar and usage, in context or otherwise, given the college instructors' expectations. Further research—and discussion between educators at both institutional levels—would seem to be in order.

Higher-Order Reading Skills: On Shaky Ground

The high school teachers and college instructors surveyed seem to agree on the importance of skills in evaluating and judging text—that is, they agree that these skills are, at least relatively speaking, less important than other reading skills. As Figure 2 shows, high school teachers gave six of their ten lowest ratings to *evaluating* and *judging* skills. While the teachers still consider these six skills to be fairly important—none gets a mean importance rating below 3.47—the rates at which they report

FIGURE 1. Reading: Skills Rated Highest by Both High School and College Instructors

- Drawing conclusions from information given
- Making inferences from the text concerning main idea(s)
- Making inferences from the text concerning details that support the main idea(s)
- Recognizing and recalling main ideas by summarizing
- Making inferences from the text concerning cause-effect relationships
- Identifying the author's purpose
- Recognizing and recalling comparisons

FIGURE 2. Reading: Skills Receiving the Lowest Mean Importance Ratings from High School Teachers and College Instructors

| Rank (64 = lowest rated) | High School Teachers | College Instructors |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| 55 | Evaluating information in a text for erroneous, biased, or dubious assumptions (3.68, 53%) | Evaluating information in a text for completeness (sufficient breadth and depth is included; no important omissions exist) (2.14) |
| 56 | Evaluating information in a text for specificity (appropriate level of precision is used) (3.63, 52%) | Evaluating information in a text for fairness (opposing arguments are represented fairly) (2.11) |
| 57 | Recognizing in a text the types of evidence used (e.g., experimentation, expert testimony, statistics, case studies, "common sense") (3.61, 53%) | Recognizing in a text the types of evidence used (e.g., experimentation, expert testimony, statistics, case studies, "common sense") (2.09) |
| 58 | Analyzing a text to determine the amount of prior and/or specialized knowledge a reader is expected to have on the topic (3.60, 54%) | Evaluating information in a text for relevance (2.04) |
| 59 | Evaluating information in a text for fallacies (e.g., false analogy, begging the question, non sequitur, ad hominem) (3.57, 47%) | Evaluating information in a text for credibility and appropriateness of sources of information (2.02) |
| 60 | Judging a text by rating it against generally recognized standards of quality or excellence (3.54, 49%) | Recognizing in a text the types of claims made (e.g., factual claims, value judgments) (1.99) |
| 61 | Judging a text by assessing the risks and benefits of policies or actions it proposes or describes (3.50, 43%) | Recognizing in a text the sources of information used (e.g., where information comes from; whether a source is primary or secondary) (1.98) |
| 62 | Judging a text by using different critical lenses or stances (e.g., aesthetic, moral, political, philosophical) (3.47, 41%) | Evaluating information in a text for significance or importance (1.91) |
| 63 | Interpreting information from graphs, charts, and diagrams, such as maps, blueprints, or schematics (3.40, 41%) | Evaluating information in a text for sufficiency of evidence in support of an argument or claim (1.90) |
| 64 | Comparing reviews of literature, film, and performances with one's own response (3.39, 54%) | Evaluating information in a text for general soundness of reasoning (1.88) |

teaching these skills are moderate at best, ranging from 53 percent to 41 percent. At the same time, the college-instructor response doesn't make a strong case for change, as seven of the instructors' ten lowest-rated skills are related to evaluating text, with "Evaluating information in a text for general soundness of reasoning" receiving the lowest rating (1.88) of any skill on either reading survey.

Since the surveys asked college instructors to rate skills as prerequisites for success in a particular class that they taught, the college surveys do not directly answer the question of how valuable the instructors think the skills themselves are. It is likely that some, if not many, college-survey participants teach these text-evaluation skills in their

classes; the low ratings may simply mean they do not expect that high school graduates already possess the skills. We feel, however, that given the prominence of such critical reading skills in state standards documents and in the research literature (Alvermann; Luke and Freebody), it is important for high school teachers and college instructors to reassess the place such skills have in their instruction and expectations, respectively.

Tracking: Grounds for Concern

One further issue brought to light by the surveys is the continued existence of curriculum differentiation, or tracking, in high school English courses.

Yet, as was true in writing, there appear to be genuine differences in instructional emphasis based, at least in part, on an assessment of students' post-high school plans.

Teachers surveyed were asked to identify whether the class they named in the survey and upon which they based the rest of their responses was made up of primarily college-bound students, primarily non-college-bound students, or an approximately equal mix of both types of students. Based on those responses, we set out to determine whether different types of writing and reading skills are taught in different kinds of classes. Though the small number of teachers describing non-college-bound courses in the surveys for writing ($n = 87$) and reading ($n = 76$) should make us cautious when offering claims about instruction for these students, the surveys still suggest that at least some teachers make distinctions about what they teach based in part on whether they think the students will head to college after graduation.

In writing, thirty-three skills “favor,” or are reportedly taught more frequently in, classes of primarily college-bound students; conversely, twenty-seven

skills favor classes of primarily non-college-bound students, with one skill taught with equal frequency to both types of classes.² While the number of skills favoring one type of class or the other is roughly equal, the kinds of skills taught more frequently to each type are strikingly different.

Figure 3 shows the ten skills most strongly favoring classes of primarily college-bound students. Of the ten skills, six deal with purposes of writing: “Writing literary or media analysis,” “Evaluating source materials critically,” “Evaluating and critiquing logical proofs and supporting materials in their own argumentative papers,” “Developing logical arguments and supporting them with valid evidence,” “Writing a research paper,” and “Interpreting literary texts.” Three writing-process skills also make the list: “Developing one’s own voice as a writer,” “Changing focus of paper depending on audience addressed,” and “Collaborating with peers in reviews of drafts.”

The eleven skills most strongly favoring classes of primarily non-college-bound students have a markedly different emphasis, as shown in Figure 4. Only two of these skills deal with purposes of writing,

FIGURE 3. Writing: Differences in Teaching Emphasis Favoring High School Classes of Primarily College-Bound Students

| WRITING SKILL, STRATEGY, OR PURPOSE | PRIMARILY COLLEGE-BOUND CLASSES ($n = 455$) | | PRIMARILY NON- COLLEGE-BOUND CLASSES ($n = 87$) | | DIFFERENCE FAVORING COLLEGE-BOUND CLASSES | |
|---|---|----------------|---|----------------|--|----------------|
| | % Taught | Mean Rating | % Taught | Mean Rating | % Taught | Mean Rating |
| Writing literary or media analysis | 92 | 4.44 | 69 | 3.70 | 23 | .74 |
| Using rhetorically effective subordination, coordination, and parallelism | 83 | 4.33 | 64 | 3.49 | 19 | .84 |
| Evaluating source materials critically | 81 | 4.36 | 63 | 3.77 | 18 | .59 |
| Developing one's own voice as a writer | 85 | 4.21 | 68 | 3.67 | 17 | .54 |
| Evaluating and critiquing logical proofs and supporting materials in their own argumentative papers | 69 | 4.30 | 53 | 3.87 | 16 | .43 |
| Changing focus of paper depending on audience addressed | 84 | 4.01 | 71 | 3.61 | 13 | .40 |
| Developing logical arguments and supporting them with valid evidence | 98 | 4.78 | 85 | 4.44 | 13 | .34 |
| Collaborating with peers in reviews of drafts | 93 | 4.01 | 81 | 3.49 | 12 | .52 |
| Writing a research paper | 75 | 4.36 | 64 | 3.82 | 11 | .54 |
| Interpreting literary texts | 93 | 4.65 | 83 | 4.01 | 10 | .64 |

and both are clearly utilitarian: “Writing a process or ‘how-to’ paper” and “Writing a paper explaining a technical process.” Eight of the remaining skills deal with basic, discrete writing issues, such as “Forming tenses of regular and irregular verbs,” “Punctuating end of sentence,” and “Forming compound tenses.”

The picture in reading is quite similar to that in writing. Forty-nine of the reading survey’s sixty-four skills favored classes of primarily college-bound students, compared to only twelve skills favoring classes of primarily non-college-bound students, with three skills taught with equal frequency to both types of classes. Figure 5, which displays the ten skills most strongly favoring classes of primarily college-bound students, shows that the percent-taught differences between the two types of classes could be quite large—as much as 47 percent for “Recognizing and understanding the use of literary devices: satire.”

Going in the other direction, Figure 6 shows the ten skills most strongly favoring classes of primarily non-college-bound students. As was the case in writing, these ten skills are different in kind from those most strongly favoring classes of primarily college-bound students. In Figure 6, we again see an emphasis on the

basic and the practical: “Interpreting information from graphs, charts, and diagrams,” “Recognizing and recalling main ideas by selecting topic sentences,” and “Recognizing and recalling main ideas by selecting key words in sentences and paragraphs,” for example. Not all of the skills could reasonably be labeled “basic” (e.g., “Using various strategies to monitor one’s own reading”), and, with the notable exception of “Interpreting information from graphs, charts, and diagrams,” all of the skills are reportedly taught with at least moderate frequency—and usually much more than that—by teachers describing either primarily college-bound or primarily non-college-bound classes. Yet, as was true in writing, there appear to be genuine differences in instructional emphasis based, at least in part, on an assessment of students’ post-high school plans.

The persistence of tracking—despite the push from the standards in forty-nine states and the No Child Left Behind Act for undifferentiated instruction—is troubling, if not unexpected. Samuel R. Lucas and Adam Gamoran, reviewing key studies of tracking from the last few decades, report that “by the 1980s it appears that most high schools did not have such clearly marked tracks” as college preparatory, general,

FIGURE 4. Writing: Differences in Teaching Emphasis Favoring High School Classes of Primarily Non-College-Bound Students

| WRITING SKILL, STRATEGY, OR PURPOSE | PRIMARILY COLLEGE-BOUND CLASSES (n = 455) | | PRIMARILY NON- COLLEGE-BOUND CLASSES (n = 87) | | DIFFERENCE FAVORING NON-COLLEGE- BOUND CLASSES | |
|--|---|----------------|---|----------------|---|----------------|
| | % Taught | Mean Rating | % Taught | Mean Rating | % Taught | Mean Rating |
| Writing a process or “how-to” paper | 41 | 3.22 | 75 | 3.82 | 34 | .60 |
| Forming tenses of regular and irregular verbs | 61 | 4.27 | 85 | 4.23 | 24 | (.04) |
| Punctuating end of sentence | 68 | 4.58 | 90 | 4.63 | 22 | .05 |
| Writing a paper explaining a technical process | 24 | 2.87 | 42 | 3.31 | 18 | .44 |
| Forming compound tenses | 50 | 4.04 | 68 | 3.93 | 18 | (.11) |
| Punctuating to indicate possession | 77 | 4.48 | 94 | 4.46 | 17 | (.02) |
| Forming modifiers | 61 | 4.18 | 77 | 4.04 | 16 | (.14) |
| Punctuating items in a series | 76 | 4.40 | 88 | 4.40 | 12 | — |
| Using the proper form of possessive pronouns | 73 | 4.44 | 85 | 4.31 | 12 | (.13) |
| Beginning a paragraph in the appropriate place | 84 | 4.40 | 95 | 4.45 | 11 | .05 |
| Using the appropriate case of a pronoun | 74 | 4.44 | 85 | 4.23 | 11 | (.21) |

FIGURE 5. Reading: Differences in Teaching Emphasis Favoring High School Classes of Primarily College-Bound Students

| READING PROCESS SKILL | PRIMARILY COLLEGE-BOUND CLASSES (n = 220) | | PRIMARILY NON-COLLEGE-BOUND CLASSES (n = 76) | | DIFFERENCE FAVORING COLLEGE-BOUND CLASSES | |
|---|---|-------------|--|-------------|---|-------------|
| | % Taught | Mean Rating | % Taught | Mean Rating | % Taught | Mean Rating |
| Recognizing and understanding the use of literary devices: satire | 93 | 4.59 | 46 | 3.68 | 47 | .91 |
| Analyzing a text to understand how writing style conveys or shapes meaning | 81 | 4.19 | 39 | 3.27 | 42 | .92 |
| Judging a text by using different critical lenses or stances | 55 | 3.78 | 19 | 3.08 | 36 | .70 |
| Analyzing a text to identify an author's unstated assumptions | 85 | 4.15 | 49 | 3.55 | 36 | .60 |
| Judging a text by rating it against generally recognized standards of quality or excellence | 64 | 3.87 | 28 | 3.33 | 36 | .54 |
| Evaluating information in a text for completeness | 66 | 3.94 | 35 | 3.48 | 31 | .46 |
| Recognizing in a text the types of evidence used | 60 | 3.75 | 30 | 3.31 | 30 | .44 |
| Recognizing in a text the sources of information used | 75 | 4.04 | 45 | 3.49 | 30 | .65 |
| Analyzing a text to identify confusing, ambiguous, or vague language | 88 | 4.23 | 58 | 3.54 | 30 | .69 |
| Evaluating information in a text for internal consistency | 64 | 3.90 | 34 | 3.19 | 30 | .71 |

and vocational. Nonetheless, de facto tracking remains: “the word *tracking* was generally avoided, and students tended to be divided on a subject-by-subject basis instead of for all subjects at once” (174). Gamoran and William J. Carbonaro contend that these divisions make a difference: “a student’s track position was the best predictor of the type of English instruction s/he received” (7). They write that “students in high tracks are more likely to be in classes that emphasize literature study, analytical writing and formal writing than students in lower tracks” (6)—a finding that is roughly consistent with our survey results.

Conclusion

The results of the writing and reading surveys would seem to be a mix of good and unsettling news. On the positive side, high school teachers and instructors of common first-year college courses already agree on what many of the most important skills in writing and reading are. On the negative side, survey

responses suggest that tracking continues in some schools and that this practice affects what writing and reading skills teachers impart to students. Also, some seemingly important higher-order reading skills have a questionable status in high school teaching and college instructors’ expectations.

We feel that the most important outcome from our presentation of these survey results would be a greater understanding between high school teachers and college instructors regarding what writing and reading skills each group considers important. Based on these surveys, a good starting point for discussion would be the place of grammar and usage in high school instruction and in college instructors’ expectations for incoming students.

Notes

1. A discussion of the method used to conduct the surveys can be found on ACT’s Web site. See <http://www.act.org/news/releases/2003/pdf/english.pdf> for writing and <http://www.act.org/news/releases/2003/pdf/reading.pdf> for reading. Note that the free Adobe Reader is required.

FIGURE 6. Reading: Differences in Teaching Emphasis Favoring High School Classes of Primarily Non-College-Bound Students

| READING PROCESS SKILL | PRIMARILY COLLEGE-BOUND CLASSES (n = 220) | | PRIMARILY NON-COLLEGE-BOUND CLASSES (n = 76) | | DIFFERENCE FAVORING NON-COLLEGE-BOUND CLASSES | |
|---|---|-------------|--|-------------|---|-------------|
| | % Taught | Mean Rating | % Taught | Mean Rating | % Taught | Mean Rating |
| Interpreting information from graphs, charts, and diagrams | 27 | 3.02 | 61 | 3.98 | 34 | .96 |
| Recognizing and recalling main ideas by selecting topic sentences | 83 | 4.48 | 96 | 4.60 | 13 | .12 |
| Using various strategies to monitor one's own reading | 69 | 3.89 | 81 | 4.34 | 12 | .45 |
| Recognizing and recalling main ideas by selecting key words in sentences and paragraphs | 86 | 4.49 | 93 | 4.62 | 8 | .13 |
| Predicting outcomes | 92 | 4.44 | 99 | 4.77 | 7 | .33 |
| Recognizing and recalling main ideas by summarizing | 95 | 4.63 | 100 | 4.75 | 5 | .12 |
| Recognizing and recalling cause-effect relationships | 97 | 4.66 | 100 | 4.63 | 3 | (.03) |
| Relating own experiences to characters and events in a text | 95 | 4.30 | 97 | 4.59 | 3 | .29 |
| Recognizing and recalling narrational and chronological sequences | 96 | 4.60 | 99 | 4.67 | 2 | .07 |
| Determining specific meanings of words or phrases from the context in which they appear | 98 | 4.70 | 100 | 4.76 | 2 | .06 |

2. Of the seventy-three writing skills, only sixty-one are analyzed here. Ten skills pertaining to evaluation of writing and two skills relating to punctuation are not included, as we did not ask the high school teachers to indicate if they taught those skills in the course they named (or even to rate the two punctuation skills).

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